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As We See It

Bush Stacked the Deck On Soviet Military Goals

HOW MUCH the United States should spend for defense depends, to a large degree, upon the answer to this question: Are the Soviets attempting to maintain military parity with the United States or to gain military superiority?

The prevailing view in defense planning has been that the Soviet objective was parity. That judgment will change in an intelligence estimate that President-elect Carter will soon receive, according to sources quoted by the New York Times. These sources say that military analysts who believe the Soviets want clear superiority have begun to prevail.

Mr. Carter said Monday he recognized that recent Soviet military growth has been substantial but that "we're still by far stronger than they are in most means of measuring military strength." He indicated that in his first meeting with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev he will express concern about the Soviet buildup.

We cannot judge the merits of the argument about whether the Soviets are seeking parity or superiority. But the way in which director George Bush of the Central Intelligence Agency has approached that question seems open to serious question.

Mr. Bush has stacked the deck. To scrutinize the CIA's own assessment of Soviet military advances and their meaning, Mr. Bush called in a seven-member team of outsiders. Apparently he deliberately enlisted experts known to hold or lean toward the view that the Soviets want not parity but military dominance.

If the New York Times report is correct,

the outsiders have largely prevailed in heated discussions with the CIA's officials. The result, it is said, is a long-range intelligence estimate that indicates the Soviet Union is well on its way toward a goal of achieving superiority.

We can see the usefulness of calling in outsiders to offer views counter to those of the CIA's experts, but not the usefulness of choosing outsiders largely or entirely of one persuasion on the central question involved.

Those who believe Moscow's military objectives are expansive, including a first-strike capability, are especially alarmed by the Soviets' development of better guided missiles, large-scale construction of underground shelters and continuing rapid buildup of military forces in general.

They think the Soviet goal is to be able to disrupt shipping lines and the flow of raw materials, to limit the West's capacity to land troops from naval vessels and to protect their own nuclear attack capabilities. With achievement of those and other objectives, according to this view, the Soviet Union might choose to launch an attack.

Those are grim assessments, and of course Mr. Carter would be derelict if he did not take them seriously. We should not allow the Soviets to develop a first-strike potential that would be so convincing that they could bully the Western world or be tempted to go to war.

But there must be a better way to arrive at sound intelligence estimates than the one Mr. Bush has chosen. Mr. Carter would do well to move immediately for a more balanced examination of the questions involved.